

STATEMENT OF DIANE K. STEED, ADMINISTRATOR,
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BEFORE THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS,
ON THE MINIMUM DRINKING AGE

July 24, 1986

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to appear before you today to testify on the National Minimum Drinking Age and its application to the District of Columbia.

The 1984 National Minimum Drinking Age law strongly encourages all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico to prohibit the purchase and public possession of alcoholic beverages by persons under 21. The law is based on the recommendations of the Presidential Commission on Drunk Driving and is intended to reduce drunk driving among younger motorists. It defines alcoholic beverages as beer, wine and distilled spirits that have an alcoholic content of one-half of one percent or more by volume.

The law requires the Department of Transportation to withhold five percent of a state's primary, secondary, urban and Interstate Federal-aid highway funds for FY 1987 if the state does not have a complying age-21 law in effect by October 1, 1986. Any funds withheld on this date would be restored if the state enacted a complying age-21 law before the funds' availability lapsed. If the state does not have a complying age-21 law in effect by October 1, 1987, the amount withheld in FY 1988 would increase to 10 percent of these Federal-aid highway funds. The amount

withheld in subsequent years would remain at the 10 percent level, but any amounts withheld on October 1, 1988 or thereafter would not be restored to the state.

Mr. Chairman, motor vehicle crashes, especially those involving alcohol, are the leading cause of death among teenagers. In 1985, approximately 12,000 drivers who had been drinking died in motor vehicle crashes. Although nine percent of all licensed drivers were under the age of 21, a disproportionate number of the drinking-driver fatalities -- approximately 16 percent -- were under the age of 21. We find that almost 45 percent of the fatally-injured drivers under 21 years of age have been drinking before the crashes that kill them. Furthermore, where the presence of different minimum drinking ages in adjoining states created "blood borders," there were many deaths of young persons who had driven across state lines for access to alcohol.

Our analysis of accident data in states that have raised their drinking ages shows that these measures save lives. Our studies indicate that states raising their minimum drinking age show a 13 percent reduction in fatal accident involvement among drivers affected by these law changes. We strongly agree with Congress' intent in enacting the National Minimum Drinking Age law: it will save young lives across the country, reduce younger drivers' involvement in serious and fatal crashes, and establish uniformity in place of the type of border problem that now exists between the District and its neighbors. We have already notified 37 states that they are in compliance with the Federal age-21 law and are reviewing the minimum drinking age laws of five additional states and Puerto Rico.

Unfortunately, the projected savings in lives have not yet prompted the District of Columbia to make the necessary changes to its law. The District of Columbia Alcoholic Beverage Control Act (Title 25, D.C. Code) prohibits the sale of hard liquor to persons under 21, but permits persons 18 or older to purchase beer and light wine. The District is one of only three jurisdictions in the entire country that permits the sale of alcohol to 18-year-olds and the only jurisdiction on the East Coast that has not enacted a comprehensive age-21 law.

The District has been under intense pressure from Virginia and Maryland, which have age-21 laws, to raise its minimum drinking age from 18 to 21. As the neighboring states have raised the drinking age, the District has become a magnet for teenagers from Maryland and Virginia who drive into the city, drink legally, then drive home and become involved in alcohol-related crashes. The lack of an age-21 law in the District impedes the ability of Maryland and Virginia to control underage drinking and drunk driving in the Washington suburbs. This impediment would be eliminated by the District's enactment of an age-21 law.

It is also significant in this regard to remember that thousands of high school students and other young people from across the country visit the District every year. As the Nation's capital, the District of Columbia has a special obligation to serve as a model for sensible behavior.

On March 26, Federal Highway Administrator Barnhart and I jointly wrote to Mayor Barry to alert him that, based on our preliminary review, the District of Columbia appeared not to comply with the National Minimum Drinking Age law and, therefore, could lose a portion of its highway

funds in the next fiscal year. After further careful review of the District's law, we wrote to Mayor Barry again on June 25, to inform him of our final determination that the District does not currently comply with the National Minimum Drinking Age law, and that the statute directs us to withhold the specified highway funds on October 1, 1986, if the District's law is not changed by that date. Our letter informed Mayor Barry that our agencies would promptly review any minimum drinking age law the District of Columbia might enact. The effect of our final determination of noncompliance will be to withhold approximately \$2 million in Federal-aid highway apportionments from the District, effective October 1, 1986, assuming that Congress reauthorizes the program at or near current levels, and roughly \$4 million per year in subsequent years.

The problem is by no means limited to the District of Columbia. The 1984 National Minimum Drinking Age law applies to all states, and we have sent similar determination letters to eight states that lack complying age-21 laws. Currently, the minimum drinking age laws of five states and Puerto Rico are under review.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to take this opportunity to urge in the strongest terms that the District of Columbia consider the public health and safety of its residents, their neighbors in Maryland and Virginia, and the many thousands of visitors to the Nation's capital and raise its minimum drinking age for all alcoholic beverages to 21.

This concludes my statement. I will be glad to try to answer any questions you may have.